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Teaching the Student, not the Subject: Videographic Scholarship

Early in my teaching career I heard a colleague say that he did not teach a subject, but rather, he taught students. This sentiment stuck with me and I have tried to keep it in mind in my teaching plans ever since. The most productive classes I have taught are the ones where students take the lead, whether this is based on their own interests or in their responses to something topical that is circulating at a particular moment. My role in facilitating these sessions is to try and help students make connections, offering a way in to consider the context of these discussions. This approach is scholarly, in that it is based on my subject specialism and knowledge of the field of Film Studies.

Film Studies is interdisciplinary by nature, the aims of which, is to further knowledge of film texts and their influences.¹ Many Film Studies programmes in Higher Education now also include a practical component, allowing students a pathway into pursuing a filmmaking career. Creating videographic work, using audiovisual material to make an argument, is an exemplary way to marry theory and practice in the classroom. Making work that engages with film theory, history and criticism enables students to understand the need to substantiate their work with peer reviewed academic writing, offering informed and researched positions in a field that is more generally dominated by the fast-paced opinions of YouTubers.² By blending research and practice in my teaching, I aim to create a space where a scholarly approach is used to enrich the discussion and advance

arguments within the discipline.

“Scholarly” video essays

I convene an optional Audiovisual Essay module (5026FILM), which students can take in their second year of a three-year undergraduate degree programme. Students tend to sign up to this module knowing what a video essay is from having watched a lot of content on YouTube and often wanting to be able to emulate these approaches. In this module I have to get them to re-think their assumptions about what an audiovisual essay is, and they soon realise that they will be asked to do a lot of work. They have homework exercises to complete each week, which involves reading, audioviewing and making, which is very different from their other modules, but students have viewed this extra workload positively. In fact, the module has consistently received 100% satisfaction rates each year. The homework assignments allow students to develop their editing skills and videographic argumentation on a weekly basis, enabling them to see, both theoretically and practically, what it is to become a scholarly video essayist.

For this module, students are required to adopt a scholarly approach to their work and create and write in ways that offer new and original findings in Film Studies. But, what do I mean when I use the word “scholarly” or more broadly “scholarship” when it comes to discussing the audiovisual essay?

There are different definitions and understandings circulating around these terms. In the UK, where I teach, The Higher Education Funding Council for

England (HEFCE) set out the terms of scholarly work. Their report from 2009 specifies that “scholarly” activity usually refers to a teaching/subject specialism (e.g. Film Studies) and is often aligned with continued professional development. However, they do acknowledge that, “[t]he definition of scholarly activity is a matter of debate within the sector.”³ This definition of scholarly activity—which many universities in England and more broadly the UK have adopted—includes pedagogical research in a subject area, but it is often considered less important than the work produced by “research active” staff who are engaged in advancing knowledge in their field beyond the classroom.⁴ The important point here is that HEFCE’s definition of scholarly activity is only concerned with teaching staff and never the student. In the US, “scholarship” tends to be more closely aligned with research activities beyond teaching and learning and is focused on a research output. For example, Jason Mittell suggests that research in the Humanities is often misaligned with the final product and not with the process of creating the work. Mittell outlines how scholarship includes analysis, argumentation, and context in order to produce a research output.⁵

I consider ‘scholarly’ work and ‘scholarship’ to contain both of these UK and US definitions, drawing from subject specialism, i.e. classroom-based teaching and learning in Film Studies, and extend this to include the research process of analysis, argumentation and context to produce a final research output, i.e. the scholarly work. For me, it is important to engage in pedagogical research in order to shape the classroom and lesson plans in order to foster the best possible environment for the students’ learning. I

want to enable students to feel they can be part of a community of videographic scholarship, which includes practitioners, teachers and students, thus facilitating students entering into this field of enquiry to illustrate their research and potentially offer new knowledge.

Certain works within the field of videographic criticism may not immediately appear to be scholarly, for example, the poetic mode is less likely to register as scholarship than, say, the explanatory mode which the students are more familiar with. Poetic works can look like a presentation of research rather than the sum of the research that went into their making. It can be difficult to ascertain the scholarship involved without providing critical writing, which highlights the analysis, argumentation, and context that went into making the piece. So, for my classes on the Audiovisual Essay module, in order to allow for all work, including those in the poetic register, to be considered scholarly, I devised assignments that would support and emphasise these research elements of analysis, argumentation and context.

Assignments

The Audiovisual Essay module includes three assignments: a written proposal, an audiovisual essay, and a critical reflection. Here I have included the assignment briefs (in italics) and an explanation of how the assignments help shape the scholarliness of the student work.

1. Written Proposal – 250 words (10% Module Mark)

The 250 word written proposal should outline the project you will work on for

the final audiovisual essay. The bibliography and filmography need to include at least 2 references to videographic criticism, 2 references to the academic discussion your audiovisual essay will address and engage with, and 2 references to audiovisual essays that will influence your approach. This proposal will be discussed individually with you in a one to one tutorial.

The first assignment is a short proposal, which requires students to ground their work in academic writing and offer examples of audiovisual essays that will influence their approach. The proposal thus requires the audiovisual essay's argument to develop from scholarly works about the given topic as well as writings about videographic criticism. This first assignment is typically due in week 5 of a twelve-week semester.

Because assignment 1 marks the first moment in the students' studies in which they are required to produce a proposal for an independent project, this form of writing can be difficult at first for them to formulate. To help them shape their proposals, I give an example of an excellent student proposal and they are able to see more clearly what is required of them for this brief. I then show them the work that was produced based on this proposal and the critical reflection written on the work.

The student receives formal video-recorded feedback (within 15 working days after submission) as well as a one to one tutorial (within 5 working days of submission) during which the project gets green lit and the next stages of the process are agreed upon. This feedback is typically received in

week 6, one week prior to Directed Study week during which students are encouraged to develop their projects. This time frame is important as it takes a number of weeks for the students to understand the requirements of the module and gain confidence with the homework exercises, while also leaving enough time to allow the students to engage in a focussed manner on creating a scholarly video essay.

2. Audiovisual Essay (65% Module Mark)

The project proposed in Assignment 1 will be discussed in a tutorial session with you and an agreed set of parameters will be approved for your project. These individual parameters will be appropriate to the project being undertaken.

The second assignment is the main project and students are able to develop a topic in any direction they wish to. This assignment is purposely left open without constraints - length, content, methods and themes - are all agreed to in the one to one tutorial meeting, rather than to prescriptive guidelines. However, the project does need to make an argument and engage with scholarship. The assignment is typically submitted in the final week of the semester where there is a class screening of all the audiovisual essays produced. In the final screening I play the audiovisual essays one after the other, without discussion between works (due to the volume of material submitted and the time available). After all the audiovisual essays have been screened the students get an opportunity to discuss their work. This peer feedback is important to help prepare the students for their final

submission, the critical reflection.

3. Critical Reflection – 1,250 words (25% Module Mark)

Document your process in developing skills in the audiovisual form. Make reference to the exercises you completed and what you learnt from this process of the hands on exercises. Discuss how this influenced your final audiovisual essay. Discuss what you found interesting in working through an academic argument in this form. What was the most difficult, frustrating, fruitful, and rewarding component? What was interesting about seeing each other's work and getting peer feedback? Make reference to at least 10 academic sources. At least 5 of these should refer to the audiovisual essay form and at least 5 should refer to the academic argument you are making within your audiovisual essay. Discuss at least 3 different audiovisual essays and how they influenced your approach. Spend about half of your essay discussing your academic argument and how the audiovisual essay form was used to advance this argument. Did the audiovisual essay lead you to new conclusions, thoughts, theories, histories?

Assignment 3 is an assessment that is in some ways familiar to the students. They have previously written critical reflections based on their practice-based work, but they have not written such reflections for their theory courses. So this module, which combines theory and practice, is asking them for material that they are not used to producing. This is why I have made the requirements of the brief so specific and detailed in order to help them address and shape their respective processes, influences, and discoveries.

The attention placed on academic argument set out in assignments 1 and 3 allows students the freedom to be untethered from directly citing scholarship in their main audiovisual piece. This allows for a range of works to be submitted, which are all rooted in theory, criticism and/or history, but have the freedom to convey that material in a more ambiguous or metaphorical manner. The formal scholarly elements required in assignments 1 and 3 thus supports the practical work produced in assignment 2. However, that does not mean that assignment 2 is necessarily without scholarly sources. Much of the work submitted includes voice-overs, direct quotations, epigraphic approaches and citations, which clearly lay out the academic arguments that the work is engaging with. For me, assignments 1 and 3 are essential for guaranteeing that the videographic work is grounded in the scholarly expectations of the university context.

In the two iterations of the module I have convened we have worked with a single film text and completed homework exercises based on that film during the first half of the semester. The first time we worked with *Film Stars Don't Die in Liverpool* (Paul McGuigan, 2017) and the second time, *Wild* (Jean-Marc Vallée, 2014). To introduce students to techniques to make audiovisual essays, I began by adapting the "Middlebury method" for the homework exercises, as described in Christian Keathley, Jason Mittell and Catherine Grant's *The Videographic Essay*.⁶ These exercises provided structured experimentations with different formal styles, which allowed for a range of scholarly approaches and interventions with audiovisual

material. It is important to note that the exercises devised for the “Scholarship in Sound & Image: Workshop on Videographic Criticism”⁷ were created with the purpose of encouraging Faculty and graduate students to move away from making scholarly arguments about their work in the first week of a two-week workshop. However, I have found that those very same exercises can be implemented to encourage scholarly student work.

In the second half of the semester students got to develop their final individual project week by week. Unlike submitting a written essay for a theory or history class, which typically is not read by teaching staff until it is submitted, students in the Audiovisual Essay module receive peer and tutor feedback every week over the last 5 weeks of the semester, which enhances and develops their ideas. This creates vastly different scholarly work to the typically produced written essay. Getting feedback and advancing and developing drafts of work each week leads to strong, rigorous, critically-engaged, scholarly audiovisual essays.

For the students, learning how to give and take feedback is integral to the scholarly process. In the first 6 weeks of the semester the students present their work each week to the class based on homework exercises. This is the only time in their degree programme that they will be involved in an individual crit session. This is both a stressful and rewarding part of the process, with students saying it is the part of the module they most appreciated. For them to step up and take part in such an exercise requires a safe space and an engagement with their own vulnerability.

Vulnerability

Brené Brown, in her book *Daring Greatly* acknowledges the importance of vulnerability in clarifying purpose.⁸ If we are to seek out and foster scholarly videographic making and writing in our students, we need to think beyond the articles and audiovisual essays they read and watch, and ask ourselves how we get them to think differently about their own work, through taking risks, being vulnerable in front of each other, making mistakes, having successes that allow them to build that scholarly argument, with research integrity.

Bruce McFarlane outlines six characteristics of an ethical researcher: “courage, respectfulness, resoluteness, sincerity, humility, and reflexivity”.⁹ These six attributes aid scholarly activity through the character development of the researcher and, in this case, the student researcher. Videographic criticism often offers surprising results within the editing timeline, and what emerges can be as profound as it is destabilising to the argument being made. Encouraging students to approach their investigations with audiovisual material with this focus of courage, respectfulness, resoluteness, sincerity, humility and reflexivity challenges surface level work and neat conclusions to instead produce complex audiovisual essays. In developing students’ scholarly work, we need to think about how we integrate research integrity into the work they create. If these six attributes are built into the module content then the best student work will offer a scholarly response to topics that reflects this integrity.

So, how do we shape our classes to encourage these characteristics? We need to tailor assignments that support students to express their work in such a way, create spaces that allow students to voice their opinions safely, offer readings that challenge the material they have previously been exposed to, and perhaps even relinquish some of our customary authority in the classroom. McFarlane suggests:

Courage is needed as a teacher to take appropriately calculated risks to innovate for the benefit of students. Here, it is easy to fall back into a comfort zone of tried and tested techniques that provide little or no challenge in extending one's own teaching expertise. In this context, more active approaches to student learning can demand courage on the part of the teacher to relinquish the control and "comfort" associated with their conventional role as an authority figure.

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With McFarlane's suggestions in mind, in addition to getting the students to complete homework exercises each week, I set myself the task to complete the same homework, offering my own work up to the crit session and the critique of students. This allows students to see my vulnerability and willingness to take on the work as they do each week. I believe as a result of this I am more approachable in the classroom because I am outside of my own comfort zone. On the second iteration of the module I went beyond the homework exercises, and submitted a proposal for an audiovisual essay to the class, and then produced one in tandem with the students, submitting it each week for critique. The demands of producing a final audiovisual essay made me feel vulnerable, perhaps sharing a similar but different vulnerability to the students. This approach creates an atmosphere where

we are all embarking on our projects together and there is a daring energy to this type of teaching and learning space. All of this can be achieved with a focus on teaching the student and not the subject, building in research integrity into the design on the module and the classroom setting.

It was important for me to introduce video-recorded feedback within the VLE. This was introduced so that students get to experience their feedback in a similar manner to how they receive feedback in the one-to-one tutorial and weekly crit sessions. This personal approach, less formal than written feedback, continues an essential part of the extended classroom experience.

Conclusion

I would like to propose that we not only consider the final audiovisual work and accompanying written literature submitted by the student, but also include the virtues of the researcher producing the piece of scholarly work. Scholarly work, which is engaged with acts of courage, respectfulness, resoluteness, sincerity, humility and reflexivity will ultimately be the type of work that makes an impact on the audioviewer. The student video essayist engaged in research integrity will produce scholarship that is challenging, robust, diverse and unexpected. The scholarly audiovisual essay does not need to be as concerned with issues of slickness and style as say a video essay created for YouTube, although scholarly audiovisual essays can also display these aesthetic traits. Instead, these works can point to research that matters to the student video essayist and thus the work will make the case for why it should matter to us.

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¹ For an overview on the discipline of Film Studies, see Annette Kuhn, "What is film Studies?", British Academy, 28th October 2019, <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/blog/what-is-film-studies/>, accessed 7th July 2020.

² I want to stress that there are many scholarly works on YouTube that are also fast paced and opinionated, for example, see Grace Lee's very popular channel, *What's so Great About That?*, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC3g8YdblbqLUAKEEAJbzMYw>.

³ HEFCE, "Supporting higher education in further education colleges: Writing higher education strategies", May 2009, https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/141/1/09_05_supp.pdf, accessed 29th June 2020, 39. HEFCE was a body that provided funding for research and teaching to English colleges and universities up until 2018.

⁴ For a definition of Research Active staff see Macquarie University's guidance notes from October 2016, <https://staff.mq.edu.au/research/strategy-priorities-and-initiatives/strategic-research-framework/Research-Active-Definition-revised-October-2016.pdf>, accessed 11th July 2020.

⁵ Jason Mittell, "Videographic Criticism as a Digital Humanities Method," *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2019*, Matthew K. Gold & Lauren F. Klein (eds), (Minnesota: University of Minnesota, 2019) <https://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/read/untitled-f2acf72c-a469-49d8-be35-67f9ac1e3a60/section/b6dea70a-9940-497e-b7c5-930126fbd180#ch20>, accessed 29th June 2020.

⁶ Christian Keathley, Jason Mittell, and Catherine Grant, *The Videographic Essay: Practice and Pedagogy*, 2019,

<http://videographicessay.org/works/videographic-essay/contents>,
accessed 29th June 2020.

⁷ Scholarship in Sound & Image: Workshop in Videographic Criticism,
<http://sites.middlebury.edu/videoworkshop/>, accessed 11th July 2020.

⁸ Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (New York, Gotham, 2012), 2.

⁹ Bruce McFarlane, *Researching with Integrity The Ethics of Academic Enquiry* (New York & London: Routledge, 2010), 5.

¹⁰ McFarlane, 164.